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Social cognition: development across the life span

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Review

Sommerville, J. A., & Decety, J. (2017). *Social cognition: development across the life span*. New York and London: Psychology Press. ISBN: 978-1138859944

From the moment we enter this world, we are dependent on others. This dependence changes as we grow, creating a harmonic balance between ourselves and others.

The goal of this volume is to describe and highlight cutting-edge research and theories that answer many questions that arise in the field of Social Cognition. This is done in a rigorous and structured way, offering multidisciplinary accounts that go beyond academic spheres.

This book is structured in two parts. First, differences between humans' and animals' social cognitive abilities and behaviors are addressed. Second, it is illustrated how these abilities and behaviors develop in humans across life span.

The first part of the book shows our social nature. For example, as early as a few hours after birth, infants respond by crying to the sound of another infant's cry. Also, they prefer to look to face-like stimuli compared to other stimuli. Moreover, preverbal infants are able to evaluate a wide range of moral events. In addition, preverbal infants show altruistic helping behaviors. Research has identified potential neural and genetic mechanisms for this orientation towards social stimuli, such as the neuropeptide oxytocin, which is associated with social engagement.

However, social cognitive skills do not develop in a vacuum. The second part of the book begins illustrating how, every day, we are exposed to a variety of social others and environmental conditions that affect development. In this line, the book offers many enlightening examples of how children learn from interacting with their environment, a field referred to as epigenomics.

Next, the development of empathy addressed, clarifying the difference between cognitive and emotional empathy. It is shown how empathy develops from emotional empathy in children, from an intuitive and automatic response; to cognitive empathy, a complex process that relies on top-down control and regulation. The authors reveal how it is not until 3 years that children discriminate between self and other states, leading to an egocentric type of empathy.

Prosociality represents thought and action intended to benefit others or society as a whole. Many examples of prosocial behavior are provided, including volunteering to help others, offering comfort towards others in physical pain, cooperating and sharing, or making charitable donations. Evidence is given that various facets of prosociality remain intact or even increase with age. It is argued that this increase is associated with greater well-being, particularly among older adults, who appear motivated to enhance emotional connectedness with others, to strengthen social ties and feelings of emotional well-being. It is shown how, unfortunately, this increase in trust may put them at increased risk for elder abuse and financial exploitation.

In the following chapter it is shown that humans show very early moral abilities. Several researches propose that human morality has an innate basis and that it is evolutionarily rooted. According to these theories, morality evolved to sustain collective actions and cooperation that lead to greater mutual gains. These conclusions are drawn from observations that children discriminate moral aggressions, such as violations of fairness, others' welfare and rights. However, it is explained how children find it especially difficult to take intentionality into account, guiding their judgements just on the consequences of actions. It is not until the age of 7 or 8 that children can robustly do this.

This excellent work significantly contributes to current knowledge on social sciences, with massive implications to pressing social matters. First, it provides essential knowledge on different conditions where social cognition is impaired, such as Autism or Schizophrenia, offering hope to all those families and individuals that suffer. The study of the development of Social Cognition can also provide scientific explanations and raise awareness of other worrying social phenomena, such as elder abuse. However, the importance of this work is that, while demonstrating our social essence; attending, understanding, interacting, helping and feeling each other, it can

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help us understand other unfortunate events such as harm, antisocial behavior, selfishness or even wars. This volume also elucidates how our environment, through socialization processes, plays an equally decisive role in social cognitive development, showing that there is much to do in society. This area of study should guide policies in educational or therapeutic settings, promoting a better civic.

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